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SUBJECT: SCENESETTER FOR VISIT OF FIRST LADY OF THE UNITED STATES MRS. LAURA BUSH

¶1. Ambassador Ford M. Fraker and the entire U.S. Mission in Saudi Arabia warmly welcome the First Lady of the United States Mrs. Laura Bush to Riyadh and Jeddah. The First Lady's visit comes at an opportune moment to underscore the importance and strength of the U.S.- Saudi bilateral relationship. The focus of her visit, the launch of the U.S.- Middle East Partnership for Breast Cancer Awareness and Research, is a new dimension to the relationship that puts the spotlight on a matter of human concern common to peoples worldwide. King Abdullah has taken a special interest in Mrs. Bush's visit and will be meeting with her in Jeddah. Princess Hessa Bent Tarrad Al-Shalan, the King's wife, will host Mrs. Bush for a private dinner with other prominent Saudi women.

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OVERVIEW

¶2. Saudi Arabia is the largest country in the Middle East and occupies a land area equivalent to the United States east of the Mississippi River. It is a traditional Islamic monarchy ruled by King Abdullah, a direct descendant of King Abdul Aziz Al-Saud, who established the Kingdom in 1932. Saudi Arabia has a Consultative Assembly, the Majlis al-Shura, which consists of 150 appointed representatives of major regions, families, businesses, and social groupings. Saudi Arabia has the largest proven oil reserves in the world; hence its importance to the global economy which shapes its external relations. Buoyed by high oil prices, the Saudi economy is expected to attain 5.4 percent growth in ¶2008. Saudi Arabia joined the World Trade Organization in ¶2005.

¶3. Saudi Arabia's total population is approximately 27 million, which includes 6.14 million foreigners. It's population is very young, with some sources estimating that 70 percent of the citizen population is 21 years old or younger. Saudis are ethnic Arabs, but there has been some intermingling with Turkish, Iranian, Indonesian, Indian, and African peoples. The majority of the population is Sunni Muslim; however, there is a significant non-Muslim population primarily comprised of third country nationals, as well as a Shi'a Muslim minority of approximately two million.

¶4. Islam is the official religion, and the Government considers it a sacred duty to safeguard the two greatest shrines of Islam, located in the holy cities of Mecca and Medina. The Great Mosque in Mecca, with the cubed, black-draped Kaaba at its open-air center, is the major focal point of Islam. It is the Kaaba toward which all Muslims pray. Travel by non-Muslims into the cities of Mecca and Medina is prohibited. The public practice of non-Muslim

religions is prohibited; however, as a matter of policy, the government confirmed that it guarantees and protects the right to private worship for all, including non-Muslims who gather in homes for religious practice. In September 2004, Saudi Arabia was added to the list of Countries of Particular Concern on religious freedom issues.

WOMEN

15. Law and custom discriminate against women in Saudi Arabia. While they have the right to own property and are entitled to financial support from husbands or male relatives, women have few political or social rights and are not treated as equal members of society. There are no active women's rights groups per se. Women are increasingly vocal about their concerns. High priority issues include access to greater professional employment opportunities, as well as improved educational opportunities for themselves and their children. Domestic violence and frequent divorce are additional issues. Women in Saudi Arabia are restricted compared to western standards. They are not allowed to drive and most women do not appear in public alone. Women cannot travel without the permission of their male "guardian," and among the more conservative Saudi men, female family members are not mentioned in conversation. Saudi women appear veiled in public, wearing the "abaya," the traditional black cloak that covers the wearer from head to toe, in some cases, including the face. Segregation of the sexes is strictly enforced, and there are separate "women,s sections" in many places of employment, including government ministries. However, some workplaces, especially those in the banking/financial sector, are integrated.

16. Education and economic rights for Saudi women have slowly improved in recent years. Girls were not permitted to attend school in Saudi Arabia until 1964, but now more than half of the country's university students are female, although university campuses are gender-segregated as well. By royal decree, 30 percent of the staffs of government ministries are required to be female; however, many ministries still do not have female employees and none have achieved the required level. There are increasing employment opportunities for women in the private sector. In 2004, women won the right to hold commercial licenses, which opened the door for greater economic participation. In addition, women have become somewhat more visible in Saudi society. For example, in 2005, Saudi state television began using women as newscasters. Although women are not allowed to practice law in Saudi courts, there are a limited number of women lawyers and several law programs have recently been established to train women in the Kingdom. In 2006, women gained the right to establish their own engineering firms, and there are increasingly more female entrepreneurs and business women.

17. Women were not permitted to vote in the 2005 municipal council elections, and it remains unclear whether they will be allowed to participate in the proposed 2009 elections. However, professional organizations such as the local chambers of commerce and industry elect members of their boards of directors. In 2005, women were allowed to vote and run for positions on the Jeddah Chamber of Commerce and Industry as well as for the Eastern Province Chamber in 2006. Two women were elected to Jeddah's Chamber Board of Directors, which also includes several appointed female members.

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HEALTH CARE
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18. The government provides Saudi citizens free health care from cradle to grave. Generally medical facilities and equipment in major urban centers in Saudi Arabia are comparable with what is available in the U.S. There are many male and female Saudi physicians, many of whom are graduates of Saudi medical schools. The Saudis are very supportive of

scientific research and advancement through such institutions as the King Abdulaziz City for Science and Technology and the Saudi university system, as well as the many hospitals in the Kingdom. Many Saudis hold Ph.D.s in the sciences from American institutions of higher education and welcome interaction with scientists from the U.S.

¶9. Breast cancer is the most common cancer among women in Saudi Arabia. There are no active governmental or private screening programs for breast cancer in the Kingdom. According to the National Cancer Registry, about 1,000 new patients were reported this past year. The incidence of the disease is still lower than other Gulf countries and other parts of the world. However, Saudi medical authorities attribute the lower numbers to inadequate screening. Incidences are not diagnosed, and not even all of those diagnosed are reported. Saudi medical experts tell us that forty percent of cases where patients' cancer has not spread, is nonetheless at an advanced stage of the disease. Breast cancer strikes Saudi women at a younger age than the worldwide average. While there are limited efforts in a few cities to promote awareness about breast cancer, there are no national organizations dedicated to this effort. In the next 15 years once the large youth population reaches middle age, Saudi medical experts predict the number of breast cancer cases will double in the Kingdom.

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EDUCATION
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¶10. Saudi Arabia has a nationwide public educational system comprising primary and secondary schools, colleges and universities, as well as technical and training institutions. Over 25 percent of the annual national budget is allotted to education, including vocational training. Students are segregated by gender in schools, usually beginning at the age of seven. The Saudi government announced that it is engaged in a ten-year effort to revise textbooks, curricula and teaching methods. It has undertaken efforts to remove intolerant language that deprecates other religions from teaching materials. There has been some progress with fewer negative references to non-Muslims, but the process is far from complete.

¶11. Public education, including post-secondary studies-- are free to all Saudi citizens. Historically, a large percentage of Saudi students pursued their degrees in the United States, particularly in the 1970's and 1980's. The majority of the current Saudi cabinet are U.S. graduates. The emergence of local universities in the Kingdom after this period, coupled with an increasingly stressed national budget due to moderate oil prices and explosive population growth, meant fewer students were later sent to the U.S. In 2005, the Saudi government launched the King Abdullah Scholarship program for students to pursue higher education abroad. The U.S. continues to host the largest percentage of these students, roughly 15,000 in 2006 studying at over 700 U.S. institutions of higher learning.

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YOUTH, CULTURE, AND SPORTS
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¶12. The Ministry of Culture and Information is responsible for all cultural programs and oversees the activities of the King Fahd Cultural Center, the Saudi Society for Culture and Arts, the Administration of Folklore and public libraries and the literary clubs. The Ministry supports the development of visual arts such as painting and photography, and sponsors many art exhibitions each year throughout the Kingdom. Saudi Arabia does not have public movie theaters, and live stage dramas and musical events are rare. Saudi youth do participate in boy scout troops which are found in most urban centers. Soccer is a major national passion. Women rarely participate in outside sports, and when they do, it is always away from the presence of men. Women are not permitted to attend public sports events.

